

# the nerd guide to europe



a nerdling special issue  
february 2003

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## introduction

One day in October, sitting at my desk and thoroughly sick of uni, I decided to go to Europe. I gathered together my last savings, threw some stuff into a bag, phoned a few friends who I knew over there, and set off over the Nullabor on the London Express.

While I was traveling around, I wrote down some of the nerdy stuff—and some of the no-so-nerdy stuff, too—that I saw and did on the continent. The resulting guide was updated every few days on the **nerdling** website, and attracted many regular readers.

Here, that travel guide has been published in zine format with added pictures and photographs. It spans four months of travels from Australia to Great Britain, through France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Slovenia, and finally to Iceland. It chronicles visits to museums, pilgrimages to the birth and resting-places of famous physicists, tours of space agencies, and profiles of fellow nerds who have been taken amazing places in their pursuits of science, mathematics and engineering.

The people that I met and the things that I saw on this trip have reinforced a message to me: that there is a lot of fantastic stuff out there just waiting for a nerd like you to seize it with both hands. Whether you want to be the guy who maintains the communication channels between the international space station and earth, or whether you want to study thermophilic bacteria in Iceland, or if you just dream of one day seeing the Matterhorn in all its winter glory — then read on and see that it's all right there, waiting for you to reach out and grab it.

the übernerdling  
Editor, **nerdling** zine  
February 2003

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They may shock you.

# england and wales

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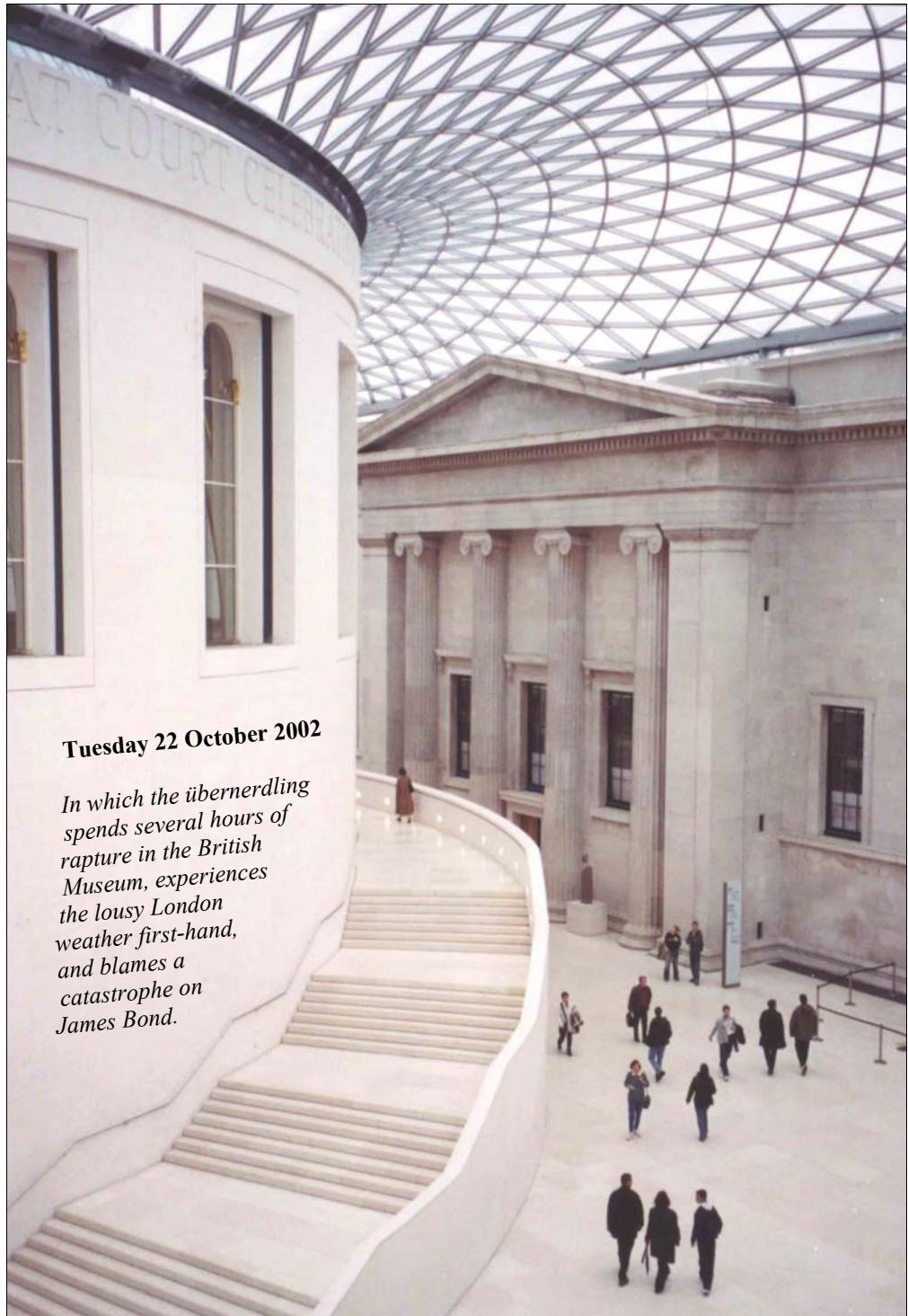
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# ales





**Tuesday 22 October 2002**

*In which the übernerdling spends several hours of rapture in the British Museum, experiences the lousy London weather first-hand, and blames a catastrophe on James Bond.*

# THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Three of my first six hours in Europe were spent in the British Museum. Rowrrr. Haven't been to the British Museum? Well: think of the two sphinx-like statues in the movie "The Neverending Story" - the ones that zap you if you're not pure enough of heart. Walking through the main exhibition of the British Museum is like walking between those two sphinxes: they've uprooted all this stuff from Egypt, put it on a plane, and bolted it to plinths in London. It's cultural vandalism, but that don't stop it being flat-out awesome.

My mission for the day was to try and find as many examples as I could of the use of polyhedra in ancient artefacts. Unexpectedly, I hit a jackpot. It seemed appropriate, in hindsight, that I should find so many under a roof that was itself a geodesic dome. I found Neolithic balls as big as your cupped hand, found in Scotland and carved into octahedral symmetries. I found Viking bracelets decorated with cubeoctahedra. There was an old teapot from ancient Delphi in the shape of a dodecahedron, Greek dice carved as icosahedra, and old Germanic glasswork jewellery of cubeoctahedra. In the words of Isaac Newton when he developed a theory of gravity, "Woohooo!"

I also saw several hundred Grecian Urns but failed to be moved to poetry nonetheless.

Unfortunately, it is school holidays here right now, and every screaming child has taken their grouchy and berating mothers to see the science museum. Which begins the next story: How James Bond Brought Science to its Knees.

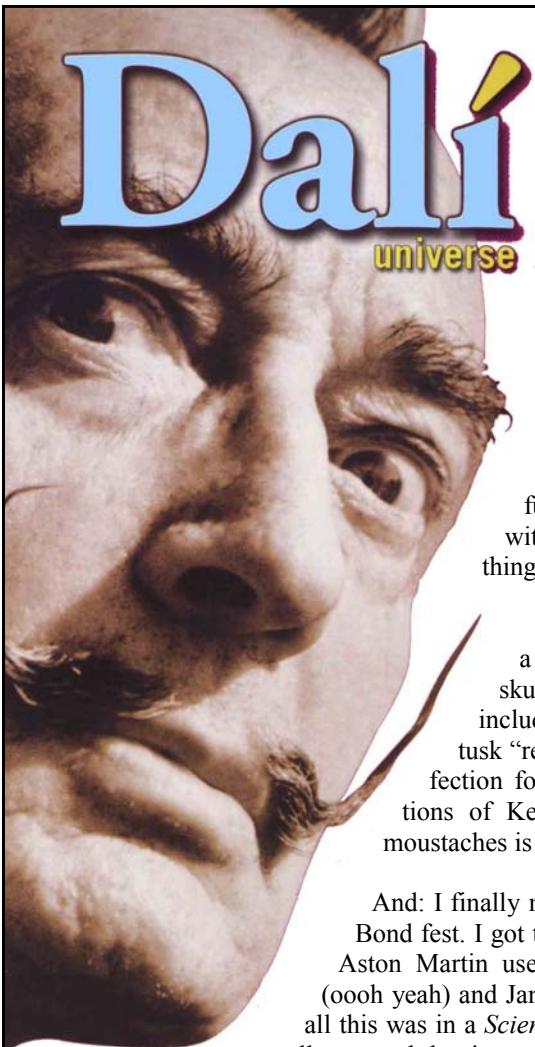
I was super excited to see the Science Museum. Especially when I found out there was a special James Bond exhibition on at the moment. (Science and James Bond -- oh the connection is sooo obvious. They once had a former playboy model play a nuclear physicist. What more can you say?) But: due to the popularity of the show, tix were sold out. Grr. Next rainy day I shall be back there as the doors open, to live my James Bond fantasies vicariously through the exhibition. Oh, and there's apparently some good science stuff there, too.

*Globular Oinochoe (jug)  
with dodecahedral pattern.*

*Circa 150 BC.*

*Said to be from Galaxidi, near Delphi.*





Saturday 26 October 2002

*In which it is discovered that Dali is a geometry nerd, James Bond is not, and that the left-hand rule doesn't always work in mazes (especially when it's pouring with rain).*

Dali Dali Dali Dali! I didn't expect to end up at the Dali exhibition but it was there as I was walking along the Thames, so I went in. Serendipity! From the first step, into an entry corridor lined with Dali quotes, I was having a ball. I love this sort of art, the Dali/Klein/Magritte stuff, where they're smart and cheeky and fun. I saw men with drawers in them, people with oversized buttocks supported by crutches, things with Catalan beans on top, and clocks melting over everything. There was an ant-covered woman with bread on her head and a film of Dali with a hemi-dodecahedral skullcap, and lots of other good nerdy stuff including a rhinoceros with a logarithm-curve tusk "representing a natural state of arithmetic perfection for Dali", tributes to Newton and reproductions of Kepler's sketches. This man with his mad moustaches is **nerdling**'s new favourite genius.

And: I finally made it to the Science Museum for a James Bond fest. I got to see Jaws' teeth and Oddjob's hat and the Aston Martin used in the race scene with Xenia Onatopp (oooh yeah) and Jane Seymour's 'Solitaire' dress. The fact that all this was in a *Science* museum was a bit amusing, and it actually seemed that in some of the information posters they were trying very hard to justify its presence by using phrases like this: "In the movie *Goldeneye*, the villain attempts to cause an electrical failure in Britain by sending an EM pulse from a satellite. In reality this is physically unfeasible as a pulse like this could only be generated from a nuclear explosion." Or "... the virus, in reality, would be destroyed by the vacuum of space and never reach the Earth, as portrayed in the movie *Moonraker*." Huh? You mean it's not REAL? Thank goodness we've got scientists to tell us these things.

"I'm in a permanent state of intellectual erection"

Salvador Dali

And then I hit the proper science section of the museum, or more specifically, the two bits I had picked out: mathematics, and science in the 18th century.

The mathematics section:

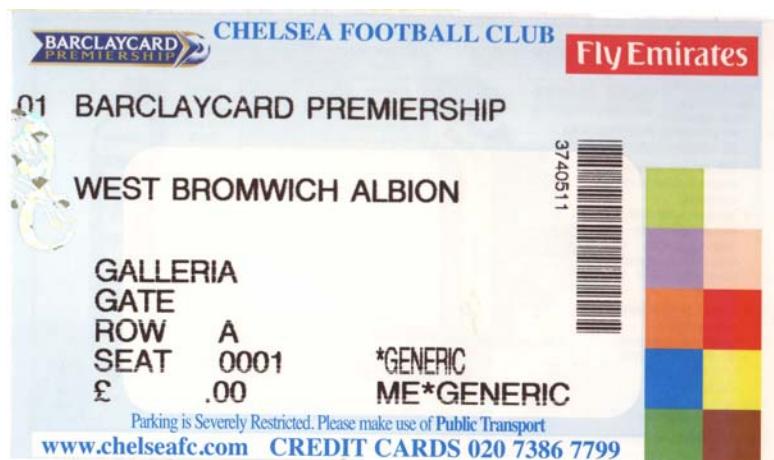
mathematical surfaces string cardboard wood cyclides a whole cabinet of glass Klein bottles! Möbius strips convex uniform polyhedra platonic solids prisms antiprisms Archimedean solids stellations harmonographs Wentzel Jamnitzer wow!

The 18th century physics section:

Fashionable science, collections of instruments, George III. Paintings by Joseph Wright. Archimedean screws and orreries. Public demonstrations of suffocating birds in vacuums. Pocket globes, tres chic.

I discovered an additional benefit of being a nerd: things that interest you do not tend to interest small, screaming children or mass crowds. So I was left to gaze at my Klein bottles in blissful peace.

And today I am off to do every scientist's favourite activity: being a British Football Hooligan at a Chelsea v. Someoneorother footy game. Wish me luck and provide good character references for me when I get nicked by the old Bill.

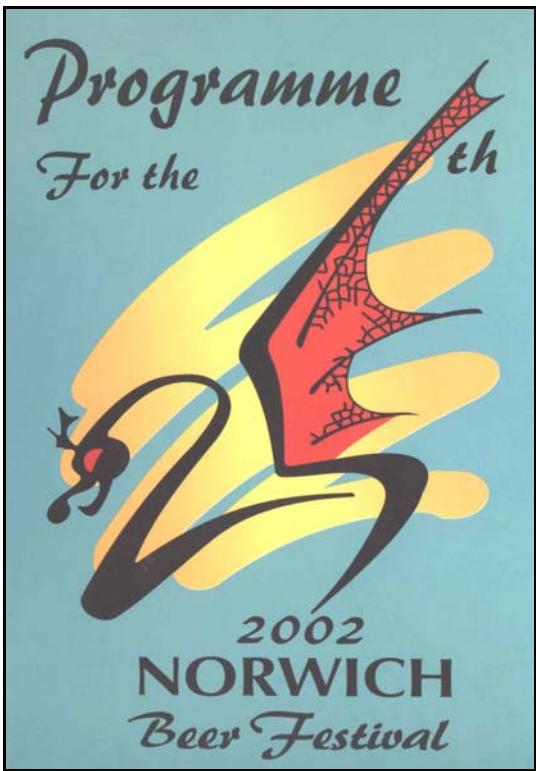


**Saturday 2 November 2002**

*In which Cambridge is debunked as a place of nerdvana, Norwich beer is tried (and tried and tried some more), a new magazine becomes an obsession, and York becomes the object of l'amour.*

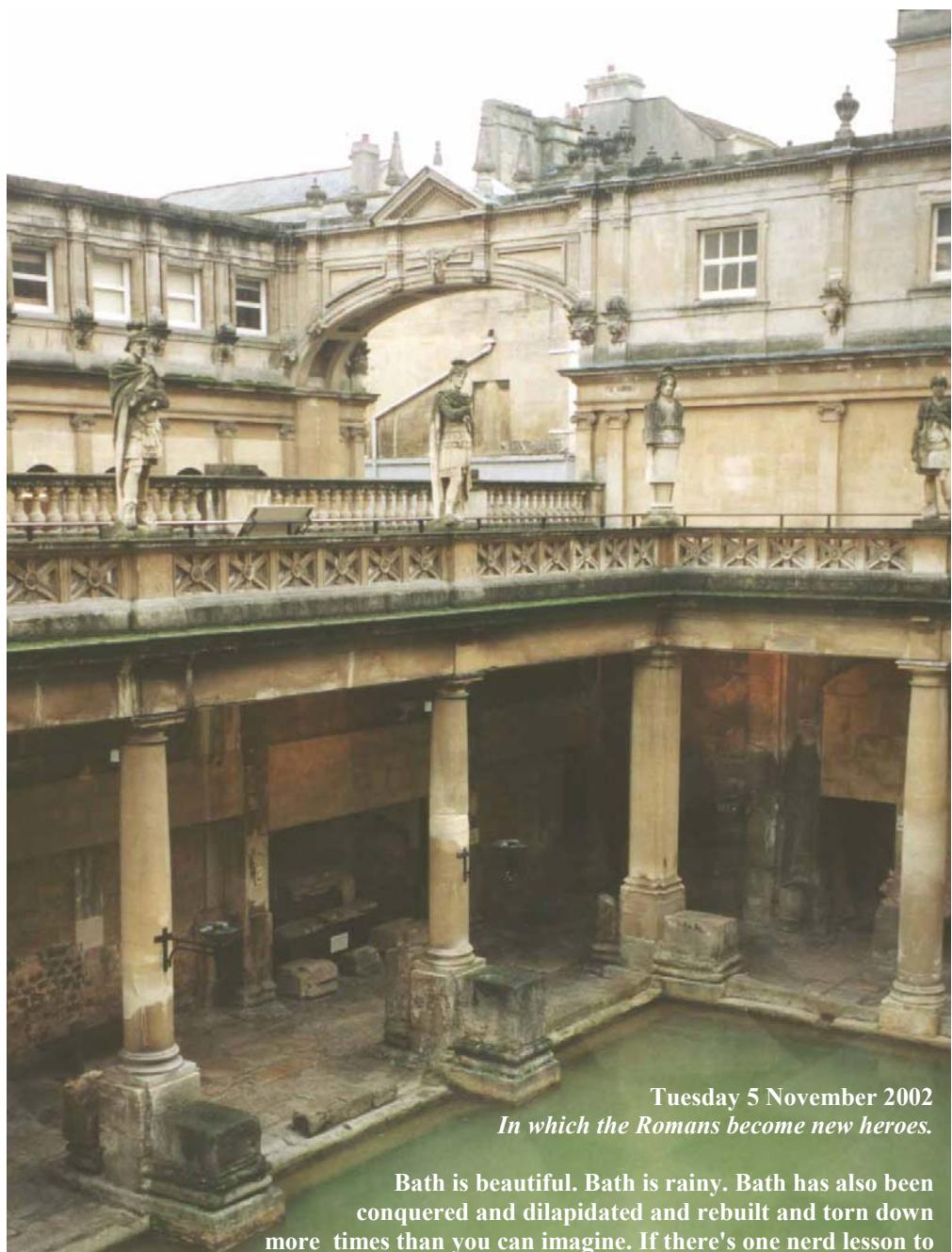
Cambridge. Been there, gotten totally over it. Crawling with tourists and the students all shitty coz they can't get to their classes without crawling over gawking old ladies with cameras. And the other half of the students enjoying being a spectacle, and talking in loud nasal voices to each other: "Aw but BRI-an. SURE-ly you just CAHN't say that you believe the postmodernistic spin on Hegel has any relevance in the neoclassical PARAdigm."

So: then on to Norwich, where I hung out with some post-grad politico-literary-of-sorts nerds, wandered around a truly beautiful town that has a church for every week of the year and a pub for every day of the year, and ended up at the Norwich Annual Beer Festival. Hurrah! It was run by CAMRA, the Campaign for Real Ale, a bunch of blokes who take their Proper Ale so seriously that they are truly beer nerds. I wasn't really a fan of beer before, but after trying honey beer, beer that tasted like crushed tomatoes but somehow was delicious (=Pavel Kwak), and a beer called 'Monty Python's Holy (Gr)Ale' I am converted. **nerdling** officially states: the Norwich Beer Festival is a nerd-friendly event. Check it out next time you're in town.



If do a search on google for nerd stuff, you will come across definitions of nerdism that include things like: 'A nerd will never worry about politics or money.' Nuts to that. If you are not the slightest bit worried about how certain powers are trying to run the world today, you are not worthy of your title as a nerd. So saying, I discovered the best politically-critical and creative and fun magazine of my life in Norwich, thanks to some Chicagoan English students: Harper's. Go to your library and read it.

And now I'm in York. A beautiful city. No nerd links to give you, except for the fact that my physics head-of-department was the one who recommended the place to me. Good Viking stuff, but.



Tuesday 5 November 2002

*In which the Romans become new heroes.*

Bath is beautiful. Bath is rainy. Bath has also been conquered and dilapidated and rebuilt and torn down more times than you can imagine. If there's one nerd lesson to be learnt in Bath it's that you can never underestimate the value of a good engineer. The Romans came in 47 AD and did an amazing job of building stuff solidly, practically and aesthetically, and then successive conquering races who knew balls-all about engineering let it all go to pot. As much as scientists hate engineers, let's look to the lessons of Bath and make peace. Yes, the social breakthroughs happen right here at nerdling.

**Tuesday, 5 November 2002**

*An extract from the editor's personal journal, written after seeing a fireworks display in Bath, and in which disturbing pyromaniacal tendencies are revealed.*

Ooh yeah. I am now glad I have studied some chemical engineering, for I shall put it to good use: I am going to become a fireworks maker. I realise that when I was on the plane to Europe all I wanted to do was be a pilot, and when I saw 'Stomp!' I was going to dedicate my life to percussion and the stage. But this is different... oh, OK, maybe I'll be all three.

In any case, I want to be the guy who goes out into a field on the weekend to try out his new creations: the ones that go higher than ever before or louder than ever before or more packed with magnesium than ever before attempted. I wanna rumble people's guts and bang on their chests and assail and attack their eyes and paint mad, twisted pictures on the sky. I want to make them coo and sigh as the night is sprinkled softly with gold dust, and then shrink and cower as I unleash spouts of wailing, writhing, twisting snakes madly into the sky. That's what I want to do.

Yes: I enjoyed the fireworks tonight. The first moment was good, when they sent up a pair of bright red pompoms and several thousand people shut up simultaneously and went 'aww!' The second moment was even better: pairs of exploding blue and yellow balls, which were born with a giant whooomph! that lingered and resounded with multiple echoes, then scarcely visible until wockkkrrr! and fingers of gold or blue shot outward. And from then on I just sat with my head back thinking 'woo-hoo!' There were lovely soft white glowing ambient balls, sent up not too high in dense but staggered handfuls that went 'dop-dop-doppa-doppa' like the sound of pouring rain. There were exploding pompoms so sharp and high and fast and big that it felt like they were balls falling speeding out of the sky at you. There were these awesome screwdriver ones that went 'fwooshhh!' and left silver bubbles in the sky. And: one of my favourites: a firework that looked like a spout down into hell had been unstopered, and released a hundred screaming, mad snakes writhing and wailing into the air. The noise was otherworldly.

Then there were the ones that sprouted at angles like blades of grass, nothing but a white glowing tip, but leaving trails of smoke behind that, in the breeze and the light of successive white tips, would form eerie scapes of waving seaweed or haunted moonlit forest. And then these landscapes would be lit blood-red by sudden big bangers, and overlaid with fizzing, crackling gold dust—awesome.

The full stop—or exclamation mark—at the end, was the simultaneous and sudden release of these low but supercharged explosive things that made almost no light but a ripping big bang that sounded like it took the sky in both hands and tore it right down the middle. Yeah!

**Thursday 7 November 2002**

*In which the übernerdling discovers a job description to die for, and a nerdling reader is a Samaritan in a truly wonderful and funky way.*

I'm in Bristol with Suman-Lata, a reader of nerdling who came into contact with us when she signed the guestbook on this website. From such inauspicious beginnings, such beautiful eventualities are born!: such as, for example, a few nights' accommodation, the most amazing hospitality, and some really great times. Thanks Lata!

Yeah, and Bristol is ace. Funny how it can be only 15 minutes away from Bath yet a world apart. Bath is for sashaying down streets in swishy old dresses or top hats and neck ruffles and staring prettily at the wonderful architecture. In Bristol, though, you chuck on your urban combat gear and go on Banksy stencil graffiti hunting trips and listen to drum 'n' bass or trip-hop or whatever you're into.

Other Bristol stuff: the Arnolfini gallery is great. And the City Museum has a copy of La Belle Dame Sans Merci (the painting of the Keats poem). It also has a chunk of Pyrite from which is protruding a perfect dodecahedral crystal. Hoooooh. And civil engineering freaks will love to stand and gawk at Brunel's masterworks, the Suspension Bridge (which is getting more famous for its suicides than its splendid engineering) and the SS Great Britain, a ship that, amongst other things, was the first to use a propeller, and which brought about 14,000 people to Australia when it was nowt but a wee convict colony.

Next stop: Wales. Hereford. Cows and second-hand-bookshop-mecca in Hay-on-Wye. Watch this space.



**Tuesday 12 November 2002**

*In which new wavelengths in the green spectrum are discovered, Hay-on-Wye is arrived at, seen and conquered, scientific scepticism in a small town is discussed, and the übernerdling's primeval urges are unexpectedly tapped into in the middle of a Welsh field.*

Well: I've found the green rolling fields I looked so long for in England. The secret is: they're all in Wales. Tramping the Welsh hills and dales is like some sort of soul-recharging experience. The green is so green it's positively luminescent, and all over the hills these specially-trained sheep are posing photogenically just for visitors like me. And then the sun will find a slit in the low purple-bruised clouds and light everything up golden and russet and white, at which point you become quite sure that you will never again need to see any scenery in your entire life.

The only thing that could make the countryside better in any way would be a quaint little winding-street town containing a ruined castle and over 30 second-hand bookshops. And lo! what a coincidence. Not five miles away is Hay-on-Wye, the book nerd's mecca. I managed to find (amongst other treasure) a copy of Buckminster Fuller's essays and lectures, and copy of Schrödinger's work 'Science and Humanism' (if you haven't read any of Schrödinger's writings, (a) you should consider doing so, and (b) 'What is Life' is the other one you should read.)

This is a bookshop in  
Hay-on-Wye →

The town in which I am staying is a small town, i.e. has less than 10 houses. An interesting story: a resident of this town who used to be a farmer decided that he had a special 'way' with animals that could be translated to humans, and set up a crystal-healing business that at £25 per hour pays a lot better than farming. And: everyone, it seems, at some stage has been to see this guy about some problem or other. It's not that they're suckers; in fact, they all have a healthy scepticism about what's going on. But they go all the same.

This guy heals problems by waving some crystal around in



the air at the end of a bit of string, and asking the crystal questions about the vibrations it senses, and then seeing which way the crystal points. He says it's done according to certain rules and procedures, so it's all very *scientific*. It's been interesting, as a scientist, listening to people's stories of going, and I suppose they can be divided into two main groups: firstly, the people who go because they want to see what it's all about, or just because they've tried everything else and think it can't hurt to try this, too; and secondly, the people who have a serious problem for which modern medicine can't help them, such as terminal cancer, and see this guy often to get him to ease their pain.

In neither case do I think any harm is really being done. The people in the first category tend to go once or twice and then realise there's nothing in it, and that's it. The people in the second category feel better because they think good is being done, which is probably a better result than medicine can give them anyway. It really only starts getting dangerous when people start to rely on this crystal treatment instead of seeking medical help for things, or when people throw away money they can't afford and end up doing more harm than good. But while I really advocate scientific education and scepticism as a 'cure' against exploitation, I do think there's a point at which the Skeptics need to stand back a little.

(Magnetic Water, though, that's another story.)

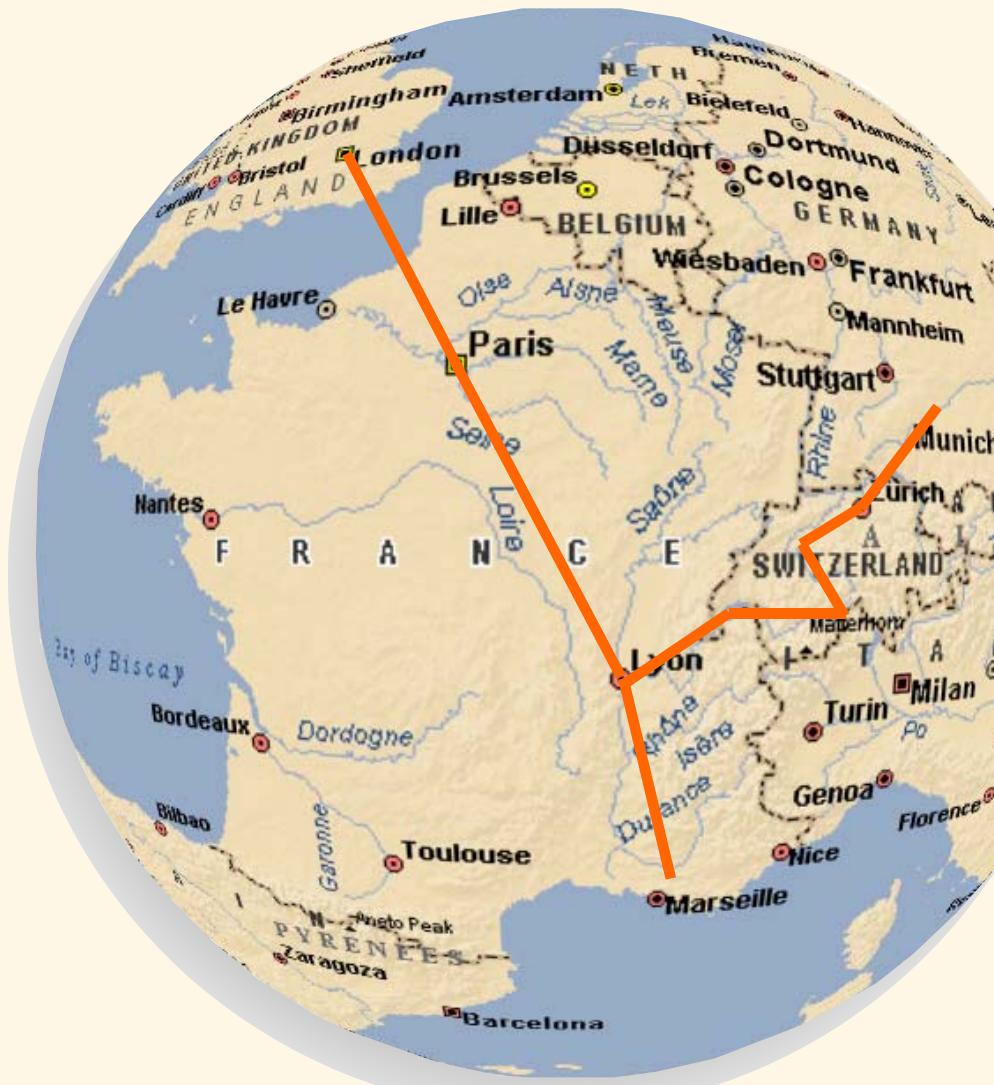
And now to a story about fluffy bunnies and latent primeval instincts. There I was, walking along a field doing nothing but innocently admiring some huge and scruffy Highland Cows, when this bloody gargantuan rabbit tears across right in front of me with the fear quite obviously upon it. No sooner have I watched its little tail disappear through a hedge but I hear this shrill cry, the pounding of hooves, and a sound that made me think there was a half-murdered child in the gorse before me, wailing and screaming for someone to give it a quick end. And then over the ridge in front of me come advancing, like some sort of strange futuristic Braveheart army, a dozen 4WDs glinting in the sunlight, a dozen riders on horseback and about thirty hounds, woofing and squealing and sniffing and snuffling.

Bloody hell, I stood there stock still trying to remember whether people hunted with guns in this country, and whether my khaki clothes would make me look like any sort of wildlife. But then as the horses swung past me and I felt the rumbling of their hooves and saw the power of the beasts and the excitement in the flared nostrils something was awakened that had lain dormant for thousands of years: I knew that all I wanted to do was join the hunt and flush out small cute animals and chase them down before bringing them to their ultimate and glorious demise.

I was enthralled enough that when the hunt committee secretary asked me if I would like to follow the hunt in her 4WD I gladly accepted. Perhaps my attitude towards hunting can be accused of being coldly rational: I spare no compassion for the rabbits that wreak such havoc back home in Australia. Or perhaps you accuse me of being too emotional, getting caught up in these primeval instincts that civilisation should have bred out. Whatever. Write me a letter about it.



# france and



# switzerland

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*Why the French may possibly be the best nerds of all; and a frecking exasperating example of why international standardisation should be the standard way of doing things, internationally.*

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*In which an astounding event occurs in a café in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, thereby making a poignant statement on the paltry level of scientific funding in the world today.*

### **Chapter 3**

*In which an unofficial day of remembrance of Marie Curie is declared and observed by the übernerdling, and we learn that we are 'specks of dust on the atom that is the earth'. (?!)*

### **Chapter 4**

*In which reader responses are noted and replied to.*

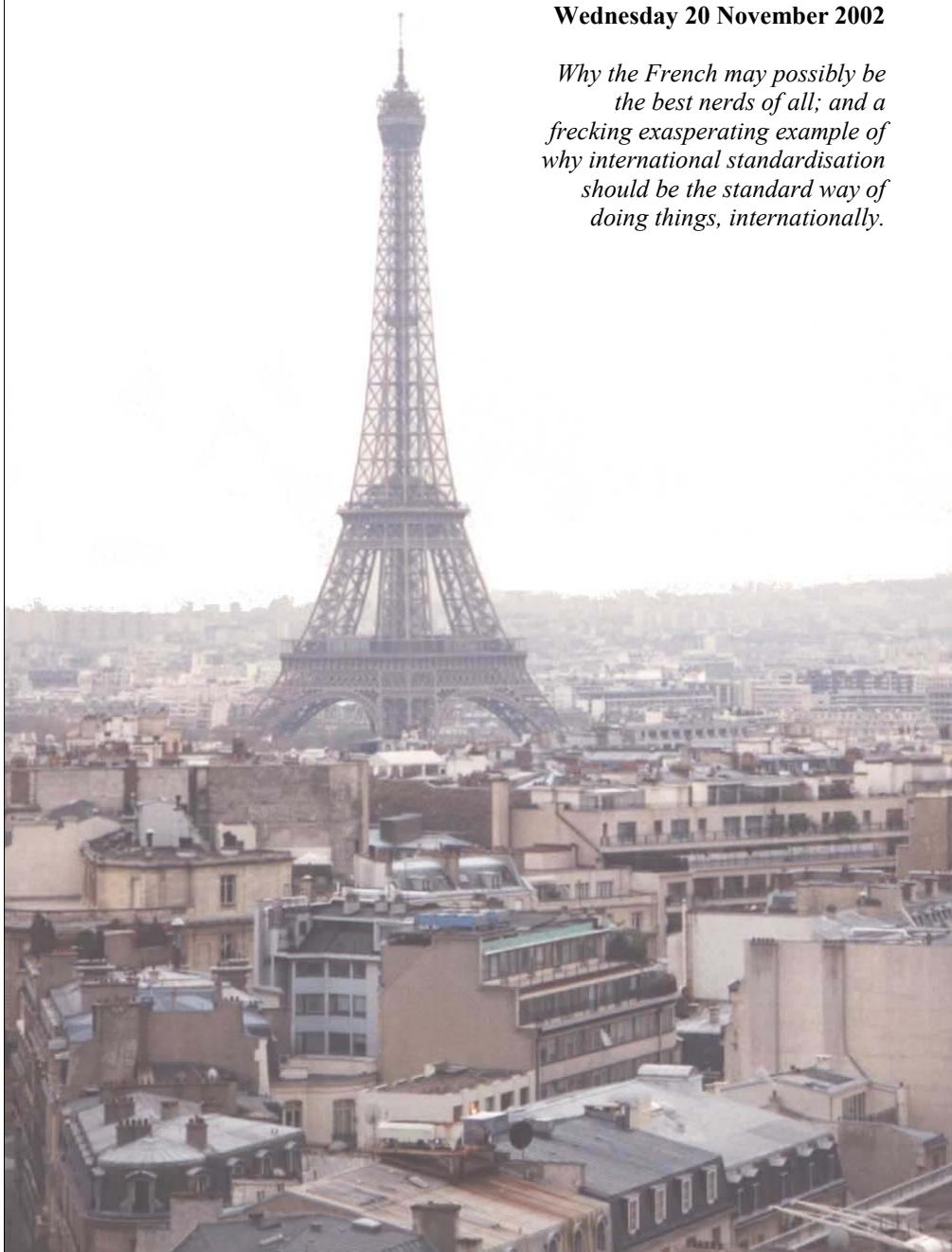
### **Chapter 5**

*In which the lyrics to a traditional old Swiss yodelling song are discovered in an antique bookshop in Lausanne, and are reproduced here for the nerdling reader.*



**Wednesday 20 November 2002**

*Why the French may possibly be  
the best nerds of all; and a  
frecking exasperating example of  
why international standardisation  
should be the standard way of  
doing things, internationally.*



I climbed the Eiffel Tower today. Inscribed around the sides of the tower are the names of 72 French mathematicians, scientists and engineers: Pasteur, Ampere, Coulomb, Cauchy, Poisson, Fresnel, Foucault... the list goes on. I was a little taken aback because until that point I had not really appreciated the huge volume of scientific output this country has had. I mean, when you think of Paris, you think of art and fashion and good food and April and spring and endless romantic movies and songs. Not equations and blackboards and stuff like that.

But: looking around the museums and galleries I think I have discovered something fascinating about nerd culture in France. Far from being a place where science is in the background, I think their secret is that their nerd culture is so well integrated to their art-and-culture culture that it's just seamless. In the Musee d'Orsay, for example, is a painting of Pasteur: art embraces science. And it is engineers and scientists that are venerated in the Eiffel Tower: science meeting art. You get the impression that by day they do science and by night they hang out with their art friends and eat the good food and drink the good wine and the distinctions disappear. And that is nerd culture the way it is meant to be. Vive la non-difference!

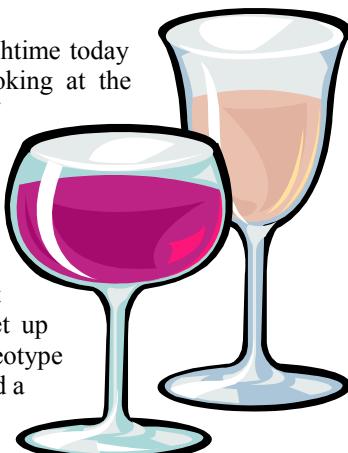
And: Flip these flipping French keyboards!! Until you have typed on a French keyboard, you have never really appreciated how often we use the letter 'm' in the English language. Just enough letters are displaced to make typing an absolute bqstqrd, if you will pardon the French as it were. And this total lack of standardisation coming from the very nation that gave us the metric system and even tried to give us the metric week. Yes, you can talk all you want about different letter frequencies occurring in different languages, etc etc. But what matters to me right now is that while I am minding my 'p's and 'q's, my 'q's are turning into 'a's and my 'm's are just commas. ,erde.

## Friday 22 November 2002

*In which an astounding event occurs in a café in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, thereby making a poignant statement on the paltry level of scientific funding in the world today.*

Well, you wouldn't believe it. I was in a café at lunchtime today feeling very hungry after a long hard morning looking at the splendour of the State Apartments in the Palace of Versailles. Unfortunately I had forgotten to withdraw enough money and due to the moths flying out of my wallet I had to order the cheapest thing on the menu: a sugar crêpe.

So I tucked into my crêpe and after one inhalation it was gone. Feeling a little unfulfilled I started to get up when the waiter (who, incidentally was the exact stereotype of a French waiter: skinny, with a little moustache and a slight stoop, who buzzed around going backwards as often as forwards and wielding this huge round



tray in front of him flamboyantly) came over and plonked this huge, steaming, delicious-smelling bowl of French onion soup right in front of me. "But I didn't order this!" I said in my (as you can read) extensive French.

"Non," he replied in his much better English. "It ees from 'er," - he pointed to the now empty table beside me where an American couple had been sitting previously - "for you." So: I, a healthy member of the (non-gender-specific-) fraternity of science, have been mistaken for a poor undernourished orphan-type and have hence been the recipient of a (very, very delicious) anonymous donation of soup. I do not think that any more needs to be said, on what this indicates about the paltry governmental financial support of practitioners of science in the world today.

## Saturday 16 November 2002

*In which an unofficial day of remembrance of Marie Curie is declared and observed by the übernerdling, and we learn that we are 'specks of dust on the atom that is the earth'. (?!)*

Listen: today I went to the Pantheon in Paris. I went there because many famous French men and women are interred in the crypt there, including the patron saint of nerdling zine, Marie Curie.

Although Marie Curie was born in Poland, she spent most of her life in Paris after moving there to study at the university. Throughout her career she battled steadfastly against the French bureaucracy, which refused to give any recognition to her work or provide her with any sort of acceptable research space. Amongst other things, she spent the four years of her PhD in a cold, derelict shed, the only laboratory space she could obtain, where she either froze in the sub-zero temperatures or sweltered over the huge molten pot of ore which she stirred by hand, from which she would eventually obtain the first pure gram of uranium. Only when the Americans, the British and the Nobel Prize committee were clamouring over her and her work, did the French institutions begin to think that she might be doing something worthwhile. And now, of course, she is the beloved child of the French people who cannot gush enough good stuff about her.



Albert Einstein once said that "Marie Curie is, of all celebrated beings, the only one whom fame has not corrupted." And in her excellent biography of her mother, Marie's daughter Eve tells of how Marie was given exactly the sort of funeral which she would have wanted: with just a quiet gathering of friends and family, to witness her burial in a garden cemetery.

So: after first treating her so poorly when she was studying here in

Paris, now that she is dead the French government has had the bright idea to dig up her bones and move her and her husband Pierre to a cold stone crypt in the bowels of the Pantheon. Why? So that they can cash in on her name and reputation, along with that of other luminaries like Victor Hugo, and hence give their beloved Pantheon some credence. And all in the name of 'giving the people what they want'.

Cynical? Who, me?

On a lighter note, the Pantheon is the place where, in the mid-1800s, Foucault organised the first big public exhibit of his famous pendulum - and in honour of that, the pendulum was reinstalled recently and can be seen swinging away! The original demonstration was notable because it was the first experiment to show, without reference to heavenly objects, that the Earth spins on its axis (as opposed to being orbited by the sun). The pantheon was chosen because its incredibly high dome was an ideal place for the pendulum to hang, as a longer string (in this case 60m) means that the angular rotation of the pendulum's swing axis is more noticeable.

When the original demonstration was opened, the Education Minister was there on hand to spout profundities about how the pendulum highlighted our insignificance in the cosmos. One of the phrases he used was that 'we can now see that the earth is nothing but an atom amidst the mighty universe, and we are but specks of dust on that atom.' With an Education Minister who has such a good grasp of scale, you gotta wonder how good an education French science students were getting at the time...



**Friday 29 November 2002**

*In which reader responses are noted and replied to.*

Over the last few weeks, several nerdling readers have contacted the zine with comments, contributions and general conversation. Feedback has come from such diverse places as Groote Eyland in Arnhemland, northern Australia (hi Lois and Mal!), and from places all over North America and Western Europe. Hi also to the REAL-LIFE ASTRO-NAUT who has been corresponding with me, and hello to the European Space Agency guy in Germany who likes to think he will be going to Mars some day. Don't we all, pal.

And now to a reader question:

Neil from Newcastle writes, "There are no travel entries between Wales and France. Is this because there is no science in that part of Europe?"

This is an accurate observation. There is a wide band of Great Britain, including the English Channel and a part of France, which contains absolutely no science whatsoever. When passing through this area it is as yet unclear what is making things fall downwards when dropped, or how sound is promulgated, and so on. nerdling intends to bring this bad state of affairs to the attention of the United Nations at the nearest opportunity.



**Sunday, 1st December 2002**

*In which the lyrics to a traditional old Swiss yodelling song are discovered in an antique bookshop in Lausanne, and are reproduced here for the nerdling reader.*

Oh God, it's nice in Switzerland, with mountains, space and snow,  
For rhubarb pie or struedel, it's the only place to go;  
Geraniums in window boxes, brushes in men's hats,  
And fashionable lapdogs that are half as big as rats.

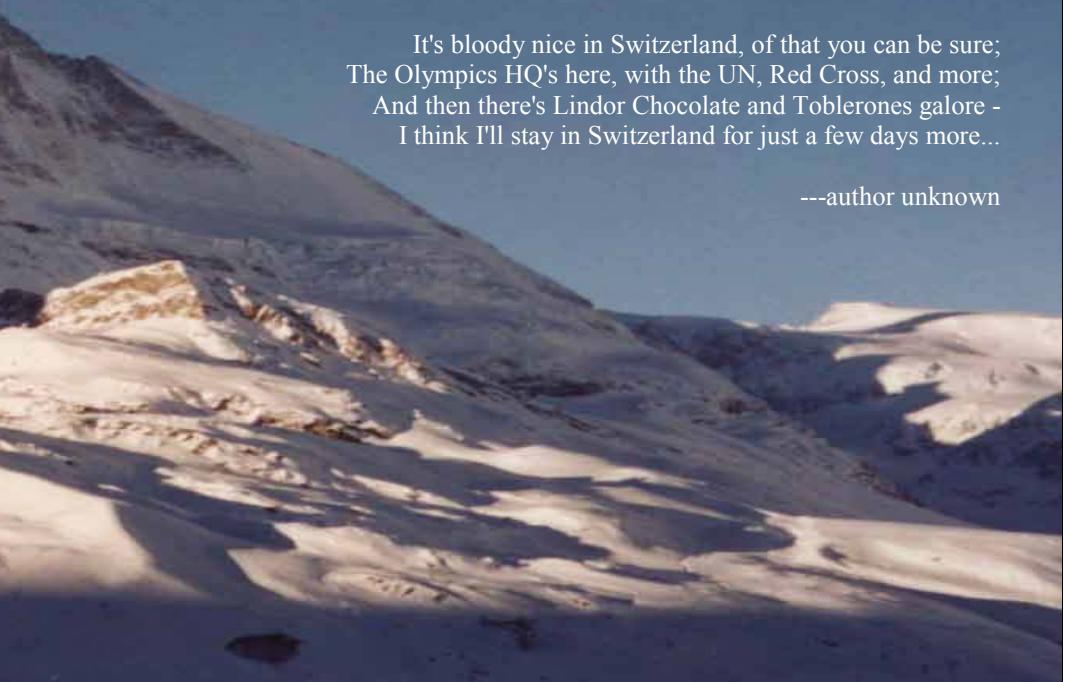
At any given moment in the main street of a town,  
There's half a dozen people hauling skis and stocks around;  
Little boys throw bread at swans while guys play outdoor chess,  
And with that accent, what they say is anybody's guess.

You go and see a movie and it's English James Bond speaks,  
But there's subtitles in three more tongues stacked up underneath.  
And you pay for all that popcorn with Swiss Francs, not Euros, please,  
Coz saying bollocks to the EU is as Swiss as Gruyere cheese.

Einstein loved Switzerland; he went to Bern one day  
And Special Relativity got developed on the way.  
How long he spent there working on it in the mountain clime  
Cannot be told, coz it depends on YOUR speed at the time.

It's bloody nice in Switzerland, of that you can be sure;  
The Olympics HQ's here, with the UN, Red Cross, and more;  
And then there's Lindor Chocolate and Toblerones galore -  
I think I'll stay in Switzerland for just a few days more...

---author unknown



# germany the netherlands austria slovenia

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given a lesson in Dutch pronunciation.

Vienna and Slovenia.

**Wednesday 18 December 2002**

SUPER LIVE REPORT FROM EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY CENTRE IN DARMSTADT, GERMANY



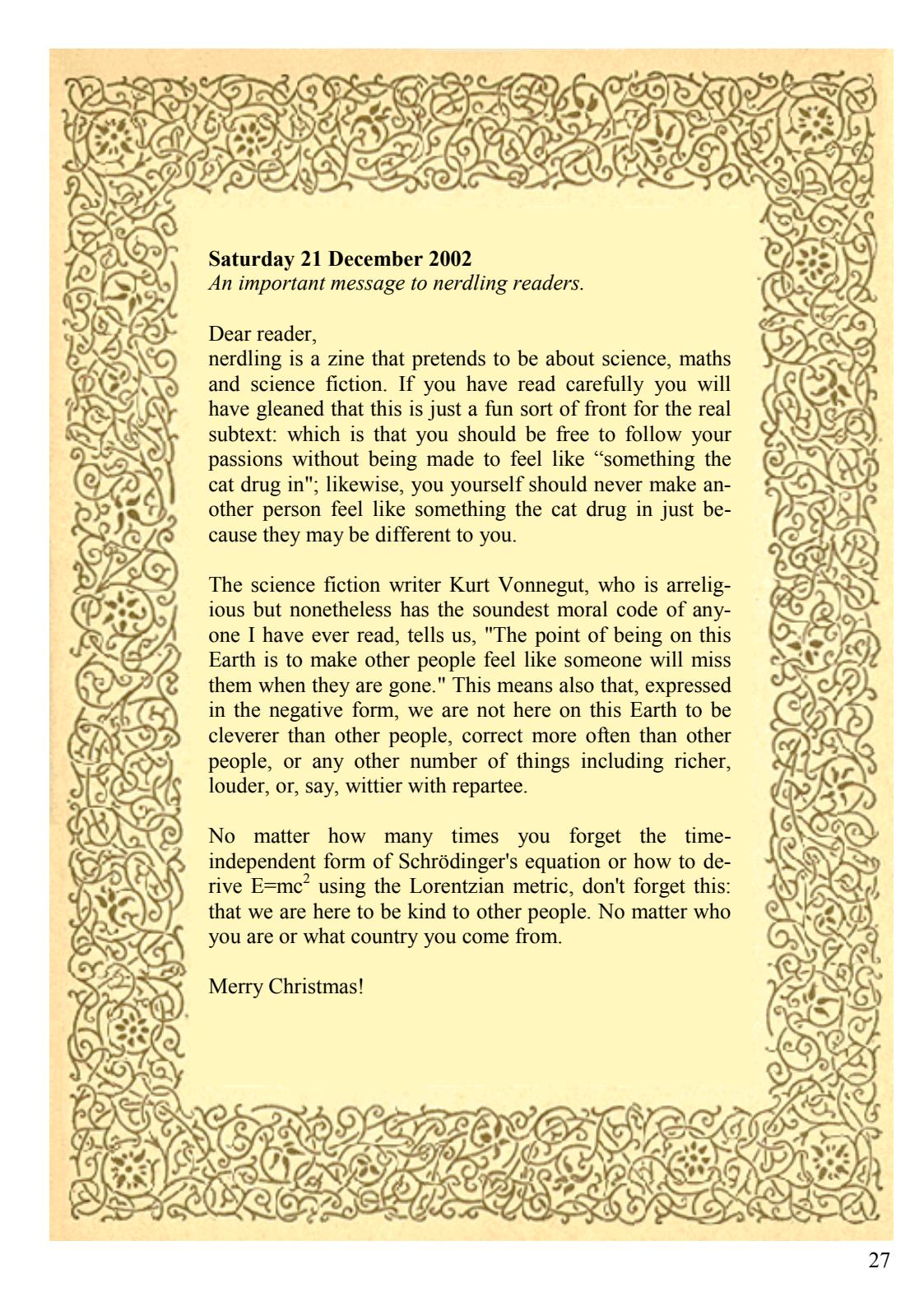
Space Station, and taxi missions taking people and equipment between there and the Earth.

Right now I am in one of the control rooms where the behind-the-scenes work is done in coordinating communications. At the flick of a switch the monitor in front of me shows a live feed from a camera on the Space Station; another flick and a different module of the station comes into the frame; another, and we get a view of a light blue crescent which is a sunrise over the planet Earth. Computer screens show schematics of how the various ESA centres are networked with NASA's Marshall Space Flight Centre and with Houston. And you get this amazing sense of being a world citizen: in this office the people speak Italian, in the one next door they speak German, and the lunchtime conversation in the cafeteria was in English.

And: the control room looks rad, complete with big-arse screens with all sort of funky schematics, as well as the obligatiory world map with red satellite-trajectory lines and a flashing red dot where the pursued object is at the moment. All it needs is a live video link to M in London and dudes standing around with audio headsets, and it would soooo be out of James Bond.

**nerdling insider information:** you can view a live camera feed from a web cam mounted in one of the Darmstadt ESA offices. To tap in and watch the guys who let space talk to earth:

- open windows media player
- Go to 'open URL' and type in <http://195.74.168.71:80>



**Saturday 21 December 2002**

*An important message to nerdling readers.*

Dear reader,

nerdling is a zine that pretends to be about science, maths and science fiction. If you have read carefully you will have gleaned that this is just a fun sort of front for the real subtext: which is that you should be free to follow your passions without being made to feel like "something the cat drug in"; likewise, you yourself should never make another person feel like something the cat drug in just because they may be different to you.

The science fiction writer Kurt Vonnegut, who is areligious but nonetheless has the soundest moral code of anyone I have ever read, tells us, "The point of being on this Earth is to make other people feel like someone will miss them when they are gone." This means also that, expressed in the negative form, we are not here on this Earth to be cleverer than other people, correct more often than other people, or any other number of things including richer, louder, or, say, wittier with repartee.

No matter how many times you forget the time-independent form of Schrödinger's equation or how to derive  $E=mc^2$  using the Lorentzian metric, don't forget this: that we are here to be kind to other people. No matter who you are or what country you come from.

Merry Christmas!

**Saturday 28 December 2002**

*A retrospective on Germany, in which the author almost dies several times in the Deutsche Museum in Munich, spends a week in Einstein's birthplace, and discovers that a town has been named after nerdling zine.*



Germany. **nerdling** zine in Germany can only mean one thing: a visit to the Deutsches Museum in Munich, a science museum so big it covers a whole island in the middle of the river. Little did I realise that the museum had designs against my life and freedom.

I visited Munich with nerdling film correspondent Marty, and together we crossed the museum threshold and stopped, wondering what to look at first. Marty had it on recommendation that the mining section was good,

"like Disneyland but in a mine", and after that bizarre comment we had to see it. We followed steps down into the basement level, and after only one or two turns the passage had become a rough-hewn tunnel through (fake but quite realistic-looking) rock. We threaded our way along dark gloomy mine passages, and tried to also thread our way through the German information signs which described in words of often twenty syllables or more, what it was we were looking at along the way. We had more luck with following the tunnels.

So saying, after wandering around confusing passages for half an hour, we were more than disoriented - we no longer had any idea how much area we had covered, which direction we were facing, how deep we were underground, or, indeed, whether we would see the light of day again. Learning about different techniques for pumping water out of mine shafts became secondary to the more immediate concern of seeing our fellow man again. We stopped looking left or right and our pace quickened. Twenty minutes later and still no sign of an exit, and the path was still taking us further downward. A German sign commented (as far as we could make out) on the fact that miners had to deal with claustrophobia and poor safety, because if anything happened, there was no quick way out. Well, the point had been made quite effectively - score one for the concept of Interactive Museum Experiences.

By the time we got to the full-scale models of modern coal munching machines, we were involved in an argument about whether we would be better to just turn back and retrace our steps to the entry point, or keep going on. An agreement was reached that at the first human skeleton we found, we would turn back. Luckily, it didn't come to that. After a while longer we finally stumbled out into the light of the museum foyer, blinking and dazed and only slightly better educated about the mining process than when we went in.

But the museum had not weakened our spirits so much that we abandoned the adventure there, no! we were more intrepid than that. And thus we plunged once more into the bowels of the museum, headed for the Mathematical Chamber.

I need not say more about the Mathematical Chamber, nor about the Astronomy display, the

entire room devoted to Archimedes and that to Galileo, nor the Chronography display, than to say that by the time we reached the Physics Room I had a fever, my face felt hot and my body felt clammy, and when I lay down on a bench in the middle of a whole room full of barometers my head felt like it weighed a million kilograms and I would never succeed in lifting it again. Only by being half-supported by Marty did I manage to stagger through the main hall full of Viking boats and to a seat. But: it would take more drastic measures to get me to quit my mission to the Deutsches Museum. And, unfortunately, those measures came in the form of two uniformed museum guards to kick us out right then: 5 pm, closing time.

But we wanted to see the aviation section. So we nodded politely at the guards, walked around the corner, and then veered right and threaded our way there anyway. Then we were closed in upon from the left. Another veer. Now there were no guards to see anywhere, but we also couldn't find the aviation section anymore and were starting to come across locked doors. Now another problem started to become apparent: we were going to be locked in the Deutsches Museum overnight. For some reason this prospect didn't faze Marty who was still tugging me towards where he could see a big propeller across the other side of this huge hall filled with zeppelins. At about the fourth zeppelin along two more guards confronted us and this time chased us all the way back to the main entrance. And thus was our time in Europe's biggest science museum drawn to a close.

The place where we were staying at the time was Ulm, right on the border between Bavaria and Baden-Wurtemburg in Germany's south - a middling city with two claims to fame: having Europe's tallest church steeple (161.5 meters high) and being the birthplace of Albert Einstein. It is an added bonus that their ways of commemorating this great physicist are nothing short of bizarre.

The main Einstein memorial statue is, inexplicably, a big rocket about as tall as a man, on the top of which lies a spiral iron seashell about a meter in diameter, encrusted with iron barnacles, from which Einstein's head is protruding with his tongue poking out. Okaaay. Opposite this is a white wall which could do with a bit of a clean and repaint, in which is embedded a very ordinary-looking rock with a plaque below saying 'Ein Stein' (=a rock' in German). Oooh the wit, the wit! You have to hunt hard through the back streets of the old part of town to find either of these. More conspicuous in the middle of the main street leading from the train station, is a monument marking where Einstein's house stood. It was erected in 1979 and is, to put it plainly, very very ugly. Nearby is a plaque to Einstein dedicated by, also inexplicably, the Indian Government. And then there's the Einstein cafe around the corner...





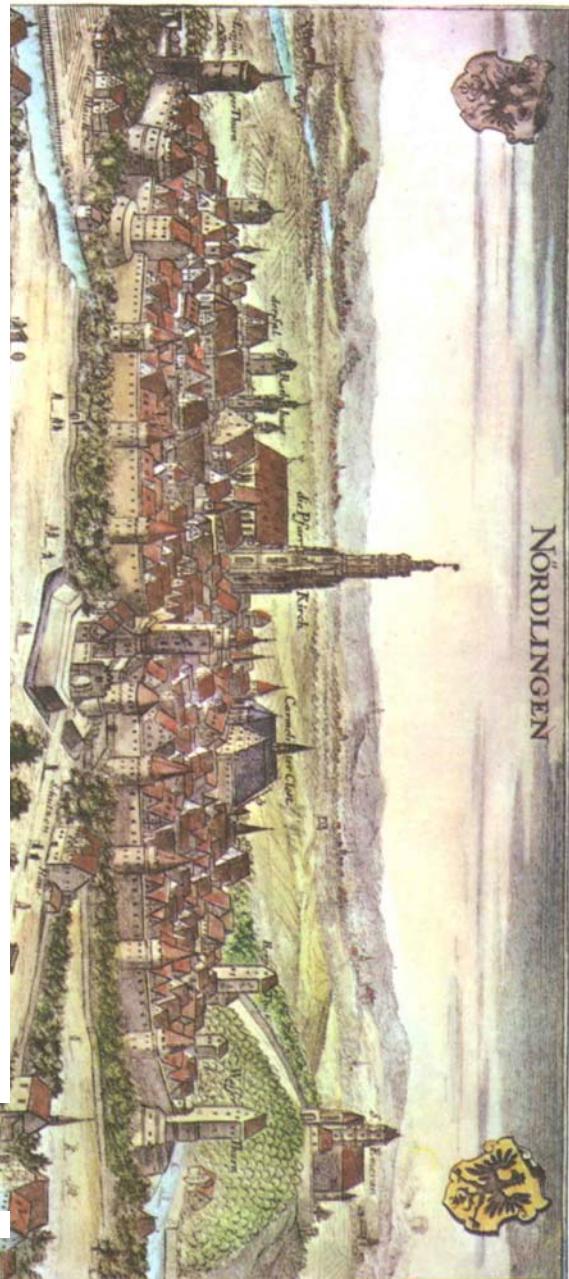
The Einstein Caf —where all the hepcats hang out in Ulm.

And then there's the entire town of Nördlingen, pronounced 'Nerdlingen'. Not only was it named after nerdling zine, it was also done so several hundred years before the inception of the magazine. This fact alone gives you an idea of how amazing and cool a place it is. Instead of gushing about all the reasons Nördlingen rocks, I'll just give you a quick list:

- it lies in the middle of an ancient meteorite impact crater 25 km in diameter
- the Apollo 14 and 17 astronauts did some training there
- one of the city watchmen used to know the astronauts. The other watchmen do not, but they will quite happily chat to you like old mates if you visit the tower, during which you will learn many interesting things, like:
- Nördlingen has a sister city in Australia, none other than Wagga Wagga, and
- all of the locals are amazingly friendly and all seem to know at least one person from Wagga Wagga, which is enough to make them treat travelling Aussies like visiting kinsmen. Thankyou to the guy in the pub who bought Marty and I a pair of beer glasses with 'Nördlinger Pils' written on the side, just coz he heard our Aussie accents and they brought back good memories of a lady from Wagga Wagga who once lived in the same street as him.

Nördling exclusive: noerdlingen mini-poster to cut out and keep →

## NÖRDLINGEN



# NÖRDLINGEN

## UND SEINE GESCHICHTE

898 1. Urkunde über Nördlingen von Kaiser Arnulf  
 1215 Freie Reichsstadt durch Kaiser Friedrich II  
 1219 Nördlingen wird Messestadt  
 1238 Ein Brand vernichtet große Teile der Stadt  
 1327 Baubeginn der Stadtbefestigung  
 1438 1. Scharlachepidemie  
 1634 Schlacht bei Nördlingen  
 SEHENSWÜRDIGKEITEN: St. Georgskirche · Salvatorkirche · Stadttor mit 5 Stadttoren · Rathaus mit Renaissance-Treppe · Barfüßer-Kloster · Tänzhaus · Gerberhäuser ·



## 1st January 2003!!!

*In which New Year's is celebrated in the traditional nerdy manner.*

All nerds know that there is only one way to celebrate New Year's: with a bloody big box of explosives and a crowded shopping mall at midnight. Yeah! And what's even better, in Germany it's even legal.

My New Year's Eve started in Amsterdam, passed through Venlo, settled in Aachen in Germany, then involved Czech Pils, a very very strange but disturbingly tasty Dutch food called Oil Balls (I am not making this up) which are raisin dough balls deep fried in oil and then eaten with icing sugar, and then mini feuerzangenbowlen. These are a sort of alcoholic drink which you prepare by piling slices of orange and lemon onto the top of your glass, which is full of a spiced, hot red wine brew, then stacking sugar cubes on top of that, dousing the whole thing liberally with 80% rum and then igniting the resulting pyre with a match. The sugar stews and bubbles and caramelises and drips into the drink. The point of this is to add to the flavour. By the time we pyromaniacs had waited for our fourth sugar/rum pile to extinguish itself and actually tried the drink, I think we'd inhaled so much rum fumes that we didn't really notice the difference anyway. But it was a nice thought anyway.

The five Dutch electrical engineers with whom I was seeing in the new year had, in the manner of all good engineers, planned the important parts of the night out perfectly: if we were going to be lighting huge fireworks rockets in the street at midnight, we would need an appropriate supporting vessel; a logical vessel to use was, for example, a really big empty champagne bottle. Thus we had the oh so unfortunate duty of having to empty several champagne bottles... yadda yadda, to cut a long story short, it was a rather excellent and fun night involving lots of pyromania, a crowded club, a very late night and brekkie the next day at 3:30 in the afternoon. What an excellent life. Happy 2003!

Footnote: one of the electrical engineers, Jeroen, is a train spotter. Despite this being the most gloriously nerdy activity one can think of, he had kept this pastime a deadly secret until I happened to see a suggestive book on his bookshelf ('A Guide to German Rail', or something) and asked him about it. At that point the game was up and he had no option but to spill the beans. A fun German train fact from Jeroen: the new high-speed InterCityExpress (ICE) line from Frankfurt to Köln - on which I traveled at 300 km/h, ooh yeah - cost the German government 12 billion Euro and was completed last year. The track is capable of high-speed traffic because of its flatness, straightness, special coating and total absence of road crossings. And: the new trains look rad.



## Monday, 6th January 2003

*In which the real reason for studying science is revealed, and the Editor is given a lesson in Dutch pronunciation.*

OK: no beating around the bush: perhaps the most fantastic thing about being a scientist (oh yes, of course apart from the thrill of discovery, the satiation of the thirst for knowledge, yadda yadda) is the fact that you meet cool people from all around the world, then you get to stay with them when you go traveling! And right now I am staying with the coolest nerd in the whole of the Netherlands, Hans. Listen to this: he did a degree in Electrical Engineering, did research for the US Government for a bit in Washington DC, came back to the Netherlands, won an international Institute of Electrical Engineers student research prize which he was flown to Cairo to present, then he got a job with a satellite/fibreoptics communication company and is now routinely flown between Amsterdam and London coz he is one of only two people with security access to the company's main nerve centres. And we're not talking 'security access' as in a four-letter-pincode here, oh no. We're talking the sort of thing the dude with the coffee had to do to get access to the CIA computer at Langley in the movie 'Mission Impossible', the computer that Tom Cruise had to hack into via that crazy harness thing. Hans actually has to do hand-scan recognition and stuff. Awesome.

He was telling me about the first three months of his job, where he was operating a sort of remote help desk for clients of the company. "Nah, it was quite boring, actually," he said. "I would just have to take these calls from these companies all around the world, like in the middle of Africa for example, where they were having problems with their satellite linkups and I would just have to find out what the problem was and tell them how to fix it." How the first sentence and second sentence can possibly follow on from each other I am unable to fathom.

Annnyway. Hans has been teaching me the correct pronunciation of all those Dutch names I have been wilfully glossing over all these years. 'Say, "Huygens,"' I ask him, and he says 'G Gh h x x - O H - g h g h x n s'. I say, 'Now say "Van Gogh"' and he says, 'Vun G gh h x x o g g h h x .' I know that since I am hearing him say these sounds, it must be possible for the human physiology to produce them; unfortunately I have no idea how or where to begin. So I have resigned to the fact that the great scientist Huygens will always be 'Hoygins' to me, and Van Gogh 'Van Goff'. As for the sentence 'Gisteren zag ik achtentachtig prachtige, machtige grachten' (=yesterday I saw 88 beautiful, grand canals', pronounced something like gghxxogghxxxhhghgxoghxoggggggggh) -- well, I think I will stick with our own fine language *Engels*.

## Thursday, 16th January 2003

*In which the übernerdling gives a severe lack of information about travels in Vienna and Slovenia.*

I have just spent a few days in Vienna and a few days in Slovenia (Ljubljana and Bled). May I simply say that they were very, very nice and if my next destination, Iceland, can top them (which I am hoping it will!) then I will be a very happy chappy indeed.

# iceland

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*In which the editor goes swimming at -5 degrees, eats decomposed shark, sees geysers and waterfalls galore, and just generally digs the weird landscape.*

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### **Chapter 3**

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### **Chapter 4**

*In which the editor becomes a volcano conquistador.*

### **Chapter 5**

*An open incitement to extreme jealousy*

### **Chapter 6**

*In which the editor describes a visit to the site of Iceland's first parliament, set up years ago, which the Icelanders affectionately and officially call the 'Thingy'. (This is not a joke.)*

### **Chapter 7**

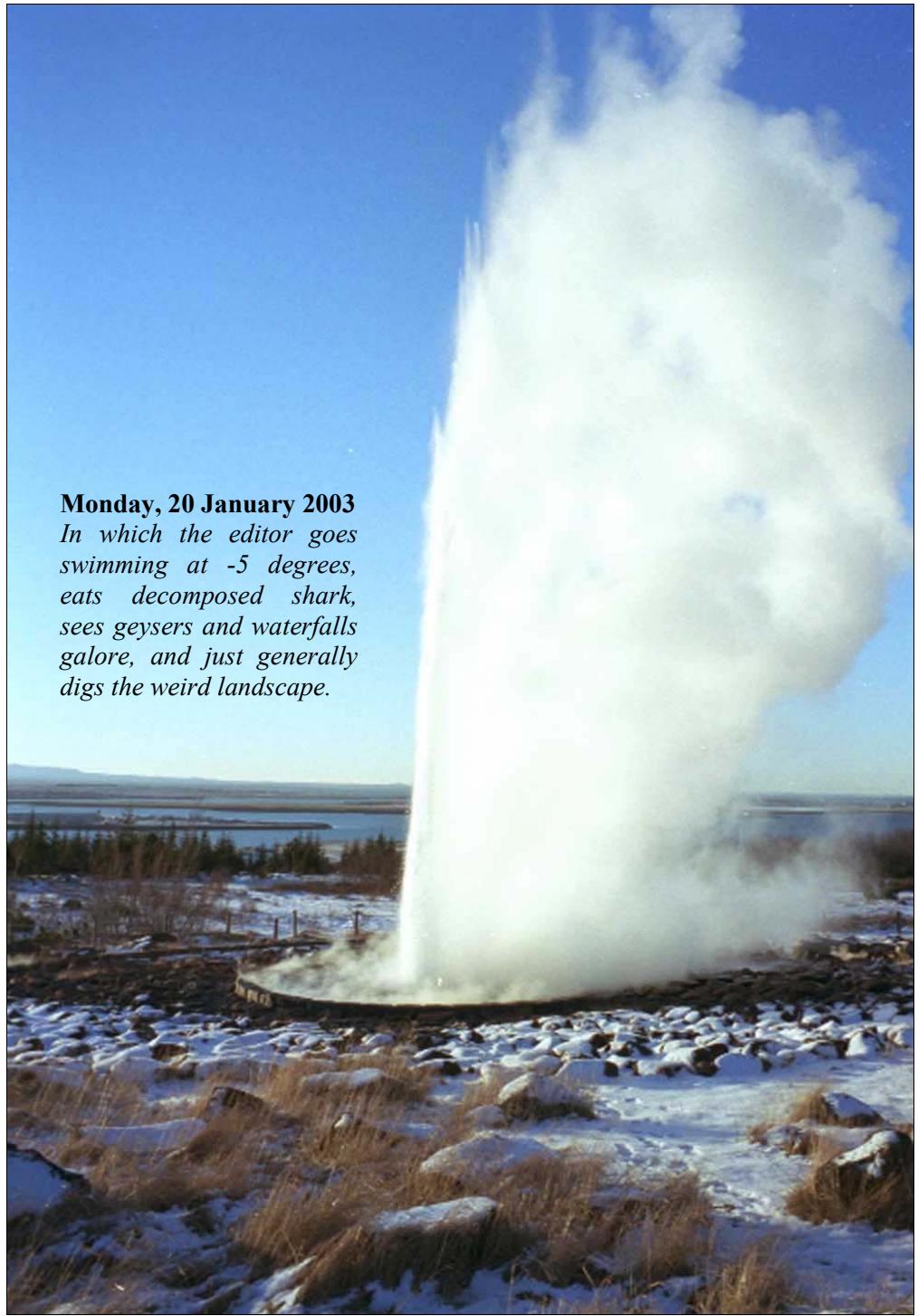
*In which the editor hits London once more, and is reduced to a whimpering little ball of bliss by the Victoria and Albert Museum.*

### **Chapter 8**

*In which lots of stuff happens, as usual.*





A large, powerful geyser erupts from a circular pool of water, sending a massive column of white steam and water high into a clear blue sky. The geyser is located in a rugged, cold landscape with snow-covered ground and rocks. In the background, there are more geothermal features and a distant shoreline.

**Monday, 20 January 2003**

*In which the editor goes swimming at -5 degrees, eats decomposed shark, sees geysers and waterfalls galore, and just generally digs the weird landscape.*

I am in Iceland, and I have never seen any place so spectacular or beautiful or alien in my life. The landscapes on the Reyknes Peninsula, or that around the waterfall Gulfoss, are the closest I have felt to standing on the surface of another planet. Yesterday on the peninsula, the sky was almost eerily clear and cold, with a big full yellow moon hanging low over the horizon, and the plains of jagged basalt and snow were stretching out into the distance. Here and there steam was rising into the sky from geothermal outlets. I spent the evening soaking in the Blue Lagoon, a thermal pool, with a French thermophilic-algae researcher called Cedric and an Australian wheat-genetics researcher named Dan. We sat in the hot milky-white water for hours, watching the sun set and turn the sky pink and blue through the steam clouds blowing around in the -5 degree evening air. After dark a faint green aurora appeared diagonally across the sky.

Reykjavik is a beautiful city. Behind it, across the harbour, rise volcanic mountain slopes that turn pink and blue in the late dawn light. The air smells faintly of fish and sulphur, and there is always a cold but fresh wind knifing through everything. The language sounds beautiful. And Bjork was at the club I decided at the last minute not to go out to last night -- grgh!

I have eaten semi-decomposed shark (a national delicacy) and harðfiskur, which is a whole fish, dried into a cardboard-like flat slab. Yummo. Believe it or not, they're actually pretty good: the shark bits taste at first like fish and then like cheese, and the dried fish is a really good hiking food.



**Tuesday 21 January 2003**  
*A note from Vestmannaeyjar,  
the Westman Islands*

Hey: I'm in the Tasmania of Iceland. It's tiny, and before 23rd Jan 1973 a sixth of the island didn't even exist - it was created from the lava flow chucked up by the volcano Eldfell on that date. The flow almost totally blocked off the harbour; it stopped just 170 meters short. If it had gone further it would have meant disaster for the residents who depend on the harbour for their livelihoods.



I got here via a three-hour ferry ride which was a bit choppy but not too bad at all. Certainly not as bad as Cedric was telling me: the last time he caught it, he said, he was planted within spewing distance of the boat rail the whole time and saw people throwing up everywhere, one guy even into his hat. Thanks for the encouraging images there, Cedric, but I made it OK in the end!

Tomorrow I'm goin' a-volcano-climin'.  
Yeehar.

## **Wednesday 22 January 2003**

*In which the editor encounters unexpected setbacks.*

The volcano-climbing mission was aborted half-way up, due to a raging wind that was blowing ash and gravel into my face and picking me up off my feet and threatening to throw me off the cliff. Too bad.

I returned to the house and had lunch, but looked out the window and it seemed like a really nice day - blue sky, sun shining, and no evidence of wind any more - so I kitted up and left the house again, destination: west coast. I only got two hundred meters down the road before I had to stop and hold on to a street sign to stop being blown out to sea. I turned around to try and head back, but now the wind was blowing straight into my face and even leaning forwards so far my nose almost touched my knees, I still couldn't push forwards with enough force to get anywhere. I seriously thought I would have to try and hitch a lift just to get the three blocks back to the guesthouse.

In the end I made it, but once I was inside again, the view out the window looked incredibly placid and calm once more. Only then did I realise the problem: everything outside that could possibly be waving or shaking in the wind, for example trees, bits of loose paper, flags - anything that could give an indication of how windy it was - all that stuff had been blown away decades ago. So now all that exists is rocks and cliffs and smooth fields to fool the visitors.

I found out later that the wind was measured at 30 meters per second.

## **Friday, January 24th 2003**

*In which the editor becomes a volcano conquistador.*

Yes, I went to Eldfell and Helgafell, I saw Eldfell and Helgafell and I conquered Eldfell and Helgafell.

Let me just say that it was an amazing feeling standing inside the rim of the crater of Eldfell. There was not another soul walking around that day, so it was just me and the slopes of dark grey rubble and the faint sound of the wind in the distance. (Yes, it was in the distance this time, thank goodness.) You look right down the gap in the crater wall where the whole side of the volcano subsided during the eruption and slid down into the harbour, and there was snow lying in the folds of rock so the shape of the lava flow was really highlighted. Past the lava field and the harbour stand several small islands with high cliff faces, and then 11 kilometres beyond that are the white mountains of the Icelandic mainland. It's really quiet and lonely and beautiful; perfect conditions for hermit-types like me.

Along the side of the crater were a few hot patches where the rocks were a bit redder than normal, and some sulphurous steam was hissing up out of the rubble. I stood there in the quiet and thought about the fact that I was standing right on the doorstep of the centre of the earth, basically right beneath my feet was the magma hotline. Just the previous day a famous Icelandic geologist had been on national tele talking about the Westman volcanoes, and he had said it was the last place on the earth he would like to live. He said the volcanoes

could go off at any time without much warning. They had seismographs planted around, though, and I had heard that this volcano tapped 20 km downwards, so I figured that it would be good for at least a few hours' warning of eruption. I was just standing there wondering what it would be like to feel the volcano start to tremble, and wondering in how many seconds flat I could run down the sheer gravelly slope to the village, and whether I would be able to hear the town volcano-warning sirens from where I was standing, and what a cool story it would be to tell back home if it actually happened - I was thinking all this, when a rock about the size of my fist dislodged itself from the crater rim behind and above my head and skipped down the slope, crunch crunch crunch in the otherwise total stillness. May I say that for about two whole seconds I had the absolute shit scared out of me. And then I climbed back down.

Next I climbed the next-door neighbour of Eldfell, named Helgafell. It's a sort of picture-perfect volcano, just the sort of cone you'd get if you funnelled lots of basaltic gravel out of a god-sized spout and let it build up where it fell - and then stuck your thumb in the top to make a nice crater-dint. From the top I got a cool aerial view of the whole island.

And then that night, just by coincidence, was the 30th anniversary of the eruption of Eldfell. So I marched down the main street with the villagers, all of us holding burning torches, and then we listened to some speeches which were held in the car deck of the island ferry. And the villagers have a lot to be proud of: listen to this: Eldfell covered the whole town in a layer of ash an average of four meters deep. Four hundred houses were bulldozed away by lava; that's a third of the village. During the whole eruption they worked hard to set up pipes and jets to dump seawater on the lava flow that was advancing on the harbour, to slow it down before it cut the harbour off (it was a physicist who came up with the idea and supervised its implementation). When the population started to return to the island they found total devastation and a completely new landscape, and they just looked at it, grabbed shovels and bulldozers, and started to clean it up, spread fertiliser on the rubble and plant grasses, and rebuild houses. What a job.

### Ode to Vestmannaeyjar

I'm on the Westman Islands  
In the winter wind and rain  
And even though it's freezing  
I've enjoyed it all the same.

They warned me of the ferry,  
Said, "Boy, you must be game -  
"You'll be spewing up for hours!" -  
But I made it all the same.

The temperature is cold; I  
Wear my scarf just like a mane  
Wrapped from collarbone to eyeballs  
But I like it all the same.

They say it's great in summer  
'cause the puffins are quite tame;  
Of course it's winter, so I missed them,  
But it's good here all the same.

I tried to climb up Eldfell,  
Got halfway, gave up the game,  
Because the wind was far too violent -  
But it was scenic all the same.

And then last night the snow fell,  
In torrential droves it came.  
Only four wheel drives can brave it;  
It looks awesome just the same.

Maybe only those who've seen it  
Will know I'm not insane  
When I say the Westmans' beauty  
Made my stay worth it, all the same!

**Saturday, January 25th 2003**  
*All I have to say is this:*

Reykjavík, last night, 2 a.m.  
a tiny club called Café Sirkus  
cool music and about 60 people  
one of them was me  
and one of them was Björk  
I was having fun  
she was having fun  
we danced until about 5:30  
and you may now commence extreme jealousy



## **Friday January 31, 2003 [a.m.]**

*In which the editor describes a visit to the site of Iceland's first parliament, set up years ago, which the Icelanders affectionately and officially call the 'Thingy'. (This is not a joke.)*

To be accurate, the name for the ancient parliament is 'Althing', but what with the Icelandic habit of declining proper nouns, the word spends a lot of its time being 'Althingi'. And it gives its name to the national park surrounding it, 'Thingvellir', and the nearby lake, 'Thingvallavatn', and so on.

The amazing thing about this place - the thing that will get geology nuts all worked up - is that it is one of the places on earth where the separation of tectonic plates is most obvious. You can actually stand on one cliff and say 'I'm in Europe now,' then climb down to the plane below, walk across the flat no-man's land, climb the opposite cliff a few hundred meters further along, and say, 'now I'm in North America'. It's flat-out awesome.

I went there überyesterday with Aussie Dan and we walked up to that amazing rent in the earth and peered down into a smaller cliff-lined valley on the America-side crack. On either lip the rock was pushed out in broken plates like clods of turf, and squeezed into semi-circular wrinkles. Inside, the cliffs were steep and fell down to a flat, grassy plain. We walked along the icy top of the cliffs past frozen streams and waterfalls that looked like great mounds of wax-drippings. We walked precariously on frozen sheets of ice and once it went crack beneath me and I looked down to see my boots disappearing into water - I skipped out pretty quick. There was feather-light snow drifting around caused by the spray thrown up from the still-liquid bits of the waterfall. We saw the amphitheatre-like slope on which used to be held the parliamentary gatherings from 930 AD. We saw the pool where female criminals were executed by drowning and the cliff from which men were hung. We saw a bare flagpole in the middle of this quiet and empty and amazing landscape and imagined hoisting the nerdling flag. We saw clear water in still, rock-lined creeks with a million lucky coins thrown in by summer-tour-group tourists. We walked through micro-forests of pine-green trees (there's an old Icelandic joke that goes, "What do you do if you're lost in a forest in Iceland? - You stand up"), and then we walked all the way back to the other end of the national park, got in the car, drove back to Reykjavik, found the funkiest cafe in Laugavegur, had a Viking beer and big bowl of hot creamy mushroom soup served in a pumpkin-sized crusty bread roll bowl, and watched everyone else freeze outside in the dark. And then we went outside and saw the most tremendous auroras. Just a standard end to a day of geological fascination, really.



**Friday, January 31 2003 [p.m.]**

*In which the editor hits London once more, and is reduced to a whimpering little ball of bliss by the Victoria and Albert Museum.*

I went in at one, I came out at seven, an' I still ain't seen the 'alf of it. It took me an hour and a half to get through the first room of the V&A museum alone. And then there were hundreds and hundreds more amazing things to see, the sorts of things that awaken imaginations that you haven't felt since you were a kid. Like: tables with paws. Rococo candelabras with dragons wrapped around them. Purple velvet chokers with peacock feathers sticking out of them like prongs. Chinese women's satin shoes as small as change-purses. Japanese pots with carp on them. Inked manuscripts in eastern writing so foreign and strange that you cannot even tell how the characters and words are distinguished. Akali turbans that look like wizard's hats with an external steel frame to hold their sharp metal throwing weapons. A painted wooden Indian organ in the shape of a tiger devouring a man, life-sized. And: a leather-bound book as thick as your palm is wide, and with pages so large you would have to use both hands to turn them, and each page is hand-calligraphed and illustrated with thick blue and red and gold borders of vines and impossible lace and pictures of saints so that it seems that the whole museum could exist on this one piece alone. And then you lift your head and look around and see that there are a hundred other things in this room alone, let alone the other thirty rooms on this floor, let alone all the other floors above you...

It's like the museum just picks you up and throws you down on your head, coz you can't breathe properly and there's a sort of ringing or singing in your brain, like you're swimming in the middle of so much fantastic stuff that you have to either compose a symphony or curl up in a corner and whimper or just grab someone and hug them really vehemently.

Sigh. Sometimes it can be really hard being a museum nerd. It's too gruelling on the emotions.



**Sunday, February 1 2003**

*In which lots of stuff happens, as usual.*

Yes: the last full day in London. Spent it cruising around the inner city with Hans who is in town for another James-Bond-type adventure involving international fibre-optic communications, etc. We wheeled up and around the London Eye, hit Leicester Square in all its Chinese New Year glory, and found ourselves in the middle of an indy-cinema sci-fi festival; cool.



# The Nerd Tour of Europe

## Trip Statistics

- number of total days of travel: 109
- number of different countries visited: 10
- percentage of these I hadn't intended to visit: 40%
- number of these countries in which it was possible to scam the public transport system: 7
- number of methods of transport utilised: 11 (plane + bus + tram + train + ferry + private car + metro/underground + chairlift + cable car + taxi + foot)
- number of other methods of transport my brother suggested I could include: 1 (riding the tectonic plates at the mid-Atlantic ridge in Iceland, at a rate of 2 cm/yr)
- approximate number of trains traveled on: 155
- number of train connections missed due to 'efficient' German system: 4
- number of hostels stayed in: 11
- number of friends/relatives places crashed at: 12
- percentage of these I'd never met before: 33%
- highest latitude reached: 64 deg N
- highest land speed reached: 300 km/hr (InterCityExpress, Limburg - Köln, Germany)
- highest land altitude reached: 3018 m (Gornergrat, Switzerland)
- lowest land altitude reached: -7 m (Rotterdam, the Netherlands)
- number of times I ate in a McDonalds: 1 (Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- number of times I ate McDonald's food: 0
- number of Lonely Planet guidebooks used: 7
- number of museums and galleries visited: 32
- number of monuments to Einstein in his birth town, Ulm: 5
- number of murders which occurred while traveling on the Orient Express: 0
- seat number on return flight to Sydney: 42
- nerdiest country (as determined by number of nerd guide entries): England
- least nerdy countries: Austria, Slovenia
- quantitative estimation of amount of fun had (expressed in SI units): 1074

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